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AUTHOR Meeks, Laura M.
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ABSTRACT

A skills center can help students who are not able to demonstrate appropriate mastery level skills in reading and mathematics. The Girard school system (Kansas) has had two skills centers operating successfully since 1975. Individualized methods combined with group interaction are used to accommodate individuality and different learning styles. Girard uses units of instruction (mostly teacher-made) which consist of goals and objectives, pre-tests, information, exercises, post-tests, remediation, and additional post-tests. Supplementary methods, techniques, or activities are combined with the units to increase student motivation. The advantages of individualized instruction are that it allows students to work at their own pace, builds positive student attitudes, encourages students to assume responsibility, reduces absenteeism, and allows teachers to measure specific learning. The disadvantages are that teachers who enjoy lecturing and leading large group discussions find that the individualized classroom is not a teacher-centered environment; and that an individualized unit program requires a great deal of preparation. (JW)

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# BASIC SKILLS CENTERS FOR SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS

Currently Kansans' attention is directed at competency measurement for the basic skills of reading and math. Administrators are faced with the responsibility of finding solutions to the need for remediation. What should be done to help students who are not able to demonstrate appropriate mastery level skills in reading and math? One solution is to design a skills center similiar to the ones in the Girard school system. At Girard two centers have been operating since 1975, one at the middle school and the other at the high school.

The primary purpose of both skills centers is to increase student achievement in math, reading and composition. Using a model of individualized instruction students' performance is monitored through pre- and post tests. Learning is facilitated through several methods of instruction. However, the most important criterion used in order to prescribe the method is based upon principles of individualized instruction. In the Girard centers students learn through individualized methods combined with group interaction.

Why do we need to individualize instruction? Our goal is to teach all students. But, we should not teach them all the same way. If students can not learn the way we teach, we should teach the way they can learn. We know that students come to us with a wide range of interests and abilities. One reason we teachers must vary our methods is because each student is an unique individual. Another justification for individualization is the awareness that students have for their own learning style perferences. Some are best instructed through visual stimulation, others auditorily and some through tactile sensations. These basic assumptions provide the rationale for using individualized instruction.

How can you individualize your instruction? Some methods include contract grades, ability grouping, learning centers, extra credit, conferences, peer

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teaching and units of instruction. The Girard skills centers use units of instruction, and these units will be described further in this paper.

What is a unit of instruction? Most of the units which are used at Girard are teacher-made. Each unit consists of the following components: goals and objectives, pre-test, information, exercises, post-test, remediation and additional post-tests. Several supplementary methods, techniques or activities are combined with these units to increase student motivation. Included are current events, games, personal experience discussions, case studies, resource persons, field trips, audio-visuals, peer teaching and role playing.

Individualized instruction has been criticized as a method which can only be used in classes of 10 or less. At Girard students in the skills centers learn individually through individual learning prescriptions (objectives and learning activities for each student). Each English teacher has 12 students per class period. However, the Girard English teachers also successfully use this technique in classes of 27-33. Using individualized instruction requires advance organization and the development of materials. The materials and equipment used for teaching with units of instruction include pre and post summary tests, progress charts, student activities charts, tape recorders with head phones and a slide projector. With very little expense or room, a teacher can facilitate learning for as many as 30 students using units of instruction.

Students learning through methods of individualization experience success. There are many advantages of this method of instruction. Students work at their own pace, building upon concepts which they have mastered - teachers do not waste students' time constantly re-teaching skills which the students have previously mastered. Gifted students can easily be motivated through this method. Another advantage of this form of instruction is students are given materials adapted to specific learning styles. Teachers should diagnose students' academic abilities, perceptual strengths, learning styles and major interests, using the

results to design learning materials. With this adaptation students can learn the way they can best learn.

Other advantages result from individualization such as the building of positive attitudes. Students assume a great deal of responsibility for their own learning which prepares them for an attitude of work. Also, problems of absenteeism are reduced since students are not held together with group activities. And finally teachers can easily measure students' specific learning by using post-test evaluations based upon objectives previously measured in pre-tests. Competency with basic skills can be concretely measured and reported, for example, at parent conferences. Through diagnosis, prescription and evaluation the teaching-learning process does produce positive results moving students toward learning goals.

There are two disadvantages, however, for the classroom teacher using individualization. The classroom is not a teacher centered environment. Teachers who enjoy lecturing and leading large group discussions will find students no longer depend entirely upon direct teacher communication. With individualization there is more contact between teacher and student on a one-to-one basis. Finally, it takes work to prepare an individualized unit program. Teachers would need a summer preparation period to initiate a complete program. However, with gradual infusion of individual learning techniques, a teacher could cope with the organization, development, and preparation needed for a program.

The skills centers at Girard produce positive results as will be shown in the second report. We welcome you to visit Girard in order to observe this method of instruction and to visit with the students, faculty and administration.

Related Readings:

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